

My name is RJ Webber and I am the Assistant Superintendent for Academics in the Novi Community School District. I am deeply committed to the belief in the transformative power of education. My father did not graduate from high school, yet entrusted our public school system to give me a great educational start to my life. He took the responsibility for instilling a strong work ethic, a belief that the world does not owe me anything, and the will to compete within my soul. I graduated from the Perry Public Schools, earned a bachelors degree from Alma College, a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the University of Michigan, and am currently a doctoral student at Michigan State University. I have taught grades 5-12 in Nigeria, Saginaw, Ithaca, and South Lyon. I have earned a Jerry Smith African Teaching Fellowship and teacher of the year honors. I have been a middle school assistant principal, middle school principal, and high school principal. I have earned the Michigan Science Teachers Association administrator of the year award. Finally, and most importantly, I am the father of an incredible 2 ½ year old boy. I share all of this information with you in order to provide context for three important questions I have for you as a committee around SB 1358.

The educator in me requires that I begin with posing an essential question:

How does a loss of local control, an increase in tax dollars going to for profit entities, and a lack of vigorous debate improve learner outcomes in the state of Michigan?

- How does SB 1358 effect community input to local schools? Local Control is at the heart of public education in Michigan. I answer to the families I serve directly and via our locally elected Board of Education. I sit in front of our elected Board of Education twice a month to engage in dialogue as to how best to serve our students. Our elected Board of Education has daily conversations with stakeholders as to how our district can best serve their needs. Local control is a bedrock notion of the constitutional framework of our nation. The recent rejection of PA 4 by the voters of Michigan underscores the belief that we have in our local entities to be responsive to local challenges. It appears that SB 1358 has many components that flatly reject the idea of local control, trading it for the creation of an Educational Achievement Authority which answers to only the governor. In fact, SB 1358 divorces the EAA from any role with our elected State Board of Education or the Michigan Department of Education. Having had the pleasure to be an educator in several districts throughout Michigan, I can attest to the pride communities take in their schools. I can also attest to the absolute importance of local control in being responsive to the needs of all learners.
- How does SB 1358 attend to oversight of Michigan tax dollars going to for profit educational entities? Our district recently completed a thorough audit that was conducted by Plante Moran. The audit was shared publicly on several occasions. Our elected school board thoroughly reviewed the audit, ensuring outstanding oversight. We

broadcast the contents of these discussions and archive them for our community members to see. Not one of the tax dollars contributed to our district was used in a manner to generate financial gain for a shareholder. Every one of our tax dollars was used to educate children, all children, in our district. Every one of our tax dollars was used to support students with disabilities, gifted students, English language learners, students coming from poverty, musically talented students, athletes, and students interested in a vocational education. Every one of our tax dollars went toward the education of all of our students in the Novi Community School District. Our tax dollars did not go toward enriching the bottom line of a for profit provider of education for some of our kids.

- How does the timeline for passing SB 1358 embody the concepts of appropriate dialogue and discourse which is at the heart of our Constitution? It appears that SB 1358, coupled with the recent work of The Oxford Foundation, is on an extremely fast track. My question is a quite simple, why? If it is because you say our schools are failing, I ask that you read the following and consider our obligation to every student in the great state of Michigan. We have an obligation to be sure that we attend to their future in a fashion that asks difficult questions and seeks comprehensive solutions. The following is an abstract of a working paper from Dr. Helen Ladd, Edgar Thompson Professor of Public Policy, Sanford School of Public Policy; Professor of Economics, Duke University. The excerpt reflects the scope of the issues we face in education and the depth of thought and action that will be required to effectively attend to these issues:

Current U.S. policy initiatives to improve the U.S. education system, including No Child Left Behind, test-based evaluation of teachers and the promotion of competition, are misguided because they either deny or set to the side a basic body of evidence documenting that students from disadvantaged households on average perform less well in school than those from more advantaged families. Because these policy initiatives do not directly address the educational challenges experienced by disadvantaged students, they have contributed little -- and are not likely to contribute much in the future -- to raising overall student achievement or to reducing achievement and educational attainment gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Moreover, such policies have the potential to do serious harm. Addressing the educational challenges faced by children from disadvantaged families will require a broader and bolder approach to education policy than the recent efforts to reform schools.

In closing, I believe in the transformative power of education. I believe that every student deserves access to the best education we can provide. I also believe in the tenets of representative democracy embodied in our constitution. I have questions regarding local control, oversight, and open dialogue that I hope the education committee is willing to answer. Thank you for your time and energy; my son and the children of the parents of Michigan need you to make informed and educated decisions.